

An Interview with Ivan and Helen Crosland



Theatre and Media Arts

Brigham Young University

Photo: Ivan and Helen Crosland, *BYU Banyan*, 1961

[Helen Crosland and her daughter collected a history of Ivan's schooling and career. The manuscripts of the Ivan A. Crosland Papers are now in the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University.]

Helen: These cover 1961-1994. That's as a student and then a faculty member.

Interviewer: I would love to see *Cyrano*; so, this is when you were a student?

Helen: JB precedes Cyrano, as I recall. It was \$2.50 or your activity card.

Interviewer: Who did your makeup?

Ivan: I did. We had to do our own. I had to even build the nose. I had to take the nose off every night with a thread that I'd run down underneath.

Helen: So he didn't have to build a new one every night. Wasn't there one of the sword fights— one of the scenes—that it got in the way?

Ivan: He slashed my nose and it kind of went off to the side. I was so determined, with my back to the audience, filling in lines and trying to remold my nose.

Interviewer: Was that during the time that they had this building they have now?

Ivan: [As faculty] we produced our productions in the Joseph Smith Building, which is not even the one we have now. Everything before that, as a student, was done on College Hall on lower campus.

Helen: You know, Academy Square, the library. There was a stage down there, he directed a lot of stuff.

Interviewer: Do you remember anything about what administrators there were back then?

Helen: You're talking department or BYU? Wilkinson.

Ivan: He was there and of course Dr. [Harold] Hansen was the department chair. I didn't end up directing like he did. After I left BYU as a student—I went a couple places, but especially at Weber, I was there four years—we would go to every kind of workshop or new idea that was coming, and all the theatre conferences. They just really wanted us to do as much of that as we could, and I did. At those places is where I came across new methods for directing and kind of established my own.

They were directing for end results, you know. Take two steps this way and then turn right, or whatever. I was trying to direct everything from the psychological point of the character. I didn't say, "This is going too slow; pick it up." It was: "Find some method that would cause that effect to happen, but that would come from the needs and the drives of the characters."

I guess the combination of all that was getting to take *Prisoner* back to Washington. We had never taken [a play] before, and we haven't since.

Interviewer: Was your process for putting that together different than any other show you've done?

Ivan: Yes, in that I was using new directing techniques. For example, we'd have one night we'd do nothing but work on the weather. They were there doing the scene and all, but what they really were doing was figuring out how cold they were, how they took care of the cold, and those kinds of things, which built in a subtext that they could then use. I don't remember their names anymore, but they certainly did a wonderful job.

The script is just so many words, whatever you go through, but we broke it down to what I would call motivational units: "On this line, this is happening." We identified and worked all of those kinds of processes, so I ended up with a lot of variety in the show and the scene would go different places and do different things.

I told that cast that they were exactly what I needed to cast the show. Almost literally, there were no extras. The ones who came to auditions were the ones I used. They just had those abilities, or we worked with them until it happened. I had a hard time getting one Chinese fellow to act tougher, stronger, you know. I'd have to push him around a little bit.

That's what I think creates the pulse of real life in a play, and you get the feeling that these are real people and they're solving real problems.

Interviewer: Do you have anything that sticks out when you were a student at BYU? That you remember pretty well as being a good thing?

Ivan: Well, I guess the two main ones—I won the popularity pole for best actor with these [roles]. One was for J.B., which was directed by [Harold] Hansen. The other one, Hansen directed it also, was Cyrano (Cyrano de Bergerac). That's what I did for my thesis.

Helen: That's what started this whole project. I found this. There's probably a dozen or more 8x10 pictures of Cyrano.

Interviewer: What year was it that you moved from those facilities, when they actually had finished the Harris Fine Arts Center?

Ivan: We had barracks. Military barracks.

Helen: There were ten thousand students here. Ten Thousand when he was graduating.

Ivan: We only could get in the Joseph Smith Building for so many days and we were out. So all the building and scenery and everything like that was done outside. Then we'd have two all-nighters that we'd go in and hang curtains and hang lights and start totally from scratch. Then we'd get our technical rehearsals in and performances in, and then we were out. The scenery was built in all kinds of places. There was a little, almost, garage kind of thing south of the lower campus where we built a lot of the scenery.

We held our reader's theatre, and the things like that—I remember—in the administration building. There was a room in there where we produced plays. We just had to find the facilities and do it.

Interviewer: What were some of the significant changes in the curriculum or the programs that you remember that were positive or negative during the time you were there?

Ivan: Well, as a student, our main preparation was for being a high school teacher: education. They even had someone—and he's the one who started the more professional performance kind of thing—and he would say, "You need to get your teacher's degree and then you can do other things."

I didn't fight it. I thought it was okay. I had a friend from Miller County, where we lived together, Sam Melville. He went directly into the profession and I raised the family and taught. I went thinking I would go into the profession, but this other was emphasized so much that I went along with that. I could see how logically, as a church member and everything, that it was probably better that I do it this way.

[Harold] Hansen really introduced us to more world performance. He had been in professional theatre himself, where he had a lot of friends, and he would get them to come and you know work with us as students, and teach some basic elements. That's when that started. Then Whitman and I really wanted to get a professional level to turn out, and we worked long and hard to try to get that to happen. Marta was brought on board, because of her professional training and all. And now I see them giving up on that.

Our focus then, no matter what we were, was: "Well, if they have to teach school or whatever, still they're going to be trained better if they have to be a professional and all these

things.” So our main emphasis was always on our productions. We just felt that where they learned was by doing and not just theory.

Interviewer: When you had to do your creative work on the faculty level, what were some of the things you did for creative research? Did you do a lot of research for the productions you did?

Ivan: Yes, we had to do that. I really feel good about the Brecht works that I did, because nobody else had even touched them, or the students didn't know anything about them.

I did *Caucasian Chalk Circle* at BYU. And *The Threepenny Opera*, that was at Weber.

Helen: Weber State College. We were up there four years before we came here.

Interviewer: You taught at Weber?

For four years.

Interviewer: How come you decided to leave there and come here?

Ivan: I felt my soul had a better chance of surviving. I would just get really worldly if I stayed there.

Helen: There was an opening and he was asked to interview. Isn't that right, Ivan?

Ivan: I only had to find one job in my life, and from then on, I was asked to come and have interviews. I was offered a job for two years as a graduate teacher, I would basically take the place of Golightly. He'd never gotten his doctorate, and they wanted him to go get his doctorate. So they kind of kicked him out for two years.

So I taught graduate school, and then I had to, at the end of that time, make my first break. I interviewed with Omaha Playhouse to be a director back there, and they liked me very well. But they asked me specifically what I would do with shows, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was quite popular right then, and I said "That's a show I wouldn't feel comfortable doing the way it is. I would have to soften the language and those kinds of things to meet my personal standards." They told me that they really liked what I did, and they had me actually direct several of their community actors in little scenes and projects, but in the letter, they said "We feel like you're standards would not be along our lines." Therefore, I was rejected and I went to teach high school. I did that for two years, and then Weber State called me and said, "Please come and submit," and so I did and got that job. And then BYU said, "Come and submit," and so I did that and got that job, and that's where I stayed the rest of my life.

Interviewer: What was the high school you worked at?

Ivan: San Leandro High School.

Helen: No, it was Pacific High School in San Leandro. San Leandro, California. We lived in Castro Valley, Oakland area, that part of the state. Silicon Valley. That's the area.

Interviewer: That must have been kind of hard to leave.

Ivan: Well, they had a very egotistical man that was over theatre. He wanted to direct everything. He didn't want to share that at all. I could do his technical for him, but he directed, and I didn't see that being as much in my line as I wanted. I designed and built *Bye, Bye Birdy*, and some of those kinds of things.

Helen: Well, and you won an international design competition. In '63.

Ivan: Well, that was at BYU, I was a graduate student. I submitted a design and it won honorable mention.

Helen: Nationally.

Ivan: Then we were doing *The Lark*, and [Charles] Henson was designing the sets and things. It was probably worked out between he and Dr. [Harold] Hansen that I could design the throne chair they used in *The Lark*, so I did that. I built it, and it looked pretty good in the style of what was presented.

Interviewer: If you were to reflect on your experience at BYU, what would you say your experience was like? Was it a good experience? Was it a difficult experience? What?

Ivan: No, it was really a good experience. I felt almost like I could be freer doing things at BYU than I could in other places. I guess the thing I really loved the most was the quality and standards of the students. All my other directing decided that. There'd be nights, for example, directing *Othello*, that Othello would come in totally drunk, and we didn't ever accomplish much. I just didn't have any of those problems at BYU. I think everybody was trying their hardest to really learn something.

Interviewer: What about working with the faculty or working in the department? And that part of it?

Ivan: Well, I guess I'd have to take this point of view: I don't know why, but I was always for the student. There would be times at our faculty meetings that certain students would be talked about or referred to, or just a broad statement would be made about them, and everybody else in the room kind of assumed that was true. And I found myself more than several times having to speak up and say, "Well, But..." And I would give the other side, the other point of view. I felt like I spent most of my time defending students. The faculty, if they got down on somebody, it was, "Too bad." They just didn't get any chances or opportunities or things. "Now he's hard to work with, don't even use him, don't consider him." You're kidding. He's got just creative abilities. Why would you not [use him]?

There was another David. What was his name?

Helen: The Comedian? Morgan? (David Morgan). He did standup comedy.

Ivan: He did the main role in *Elephant Man*. Well, he just got a reputation that he's hard to work with, and it was a problem. I went just the other way, I would try to get him in things. He had such good talent, and I wanted him to develop that and not be hung up on the other things.

There were several students like that, like Joe Bates. There was a time when everybody just got down on him. Then I simply said, "Well, let me tell him how you feel and what you're thinking." And he just did a complete turnaround, because he didn't really know. He said, "That's what they think of me? That's how they see me?"

Interviewer: What was the year you retired?

Helen: January of '95. Fall semester of '94 was his last semester.

Ivan: My health just got so bad that I couldn't cope with things any more. I feel more fluent right now than I have for ages, because I'm talking about familiar things. But if I were having to direct somebody, and point them different directions, I don't think I could anymore.

Helen: He told me last night, as he had sat around here yesterday—He directed Zion for the church, some production—he said that yesterday he went through the whole process of that show in his mind, and I thought, "Wow, that was an exercise."

Ivan: I can still remember my little cassette player, while I was walking the rows in the tabernacle to see how long it's going to take to get people from the end over there, for the pageantry.

Helen: He assisted Dr. Hansen at the New York pageant a couple years ago.

Ivan: Multimedia productions were just coming in vogue in that time, and I had quite a bit of experience because of these workshops and things that I'd gone to. So it was just a breeze for me to do *Zion* and put live acting with slides and film and so forth.

Helen: You asked about Caucasian Chalk Circle. This was in the 73-74 season.

Ivan: Let me tell you just a story about *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Everybody thinks you'll direct in a way that doesn't deal in the emotional things, just the intellectual things, and there's sterile, awful productions created when you watch it done that way. But I didn't find that so at all. I don't have the language, but I had a student who translated a lot of Brecht's writings about his productions that he wrote and how they work. He would say, for example, "Now you open the door and suddenly you see the babe there lying on the porch, and immediately you have suspicions as to what is going on. You look all around, and see if you can see anybody that's doing anything or that's left something. Then you get more interested in the babe again, and you notice it's clothing that it's wrapped in. And you can see that, wow, that's pretty good linen, this baby came from somebody that had some money." It was those kind of things. So I taught the actors that same method, and it was a realistic, you know, as realism is, because of all that sub text that they would go to. I had no idea that that was how he worked, because I hadn't found that written up anywhere.

The trick is to get involved, and they did. You know, realistic acting with the audience, and you get to a certain point and you feel like there's going to be a climax, and suddenly—stop it, drop out of character, walk down to the front of the audience, and say, "Now, let me tell you what really did happen."

Interviewer: Who designed it for you, do you remember?

Ivan: I think it was Chuck Henson. When they're crossing the mountain and so forth on the bridge, we just put a couple of big poles in, and I still have kept the wood that went over.

Helen: The pulley type thing, yeah.

Ivan: And just throw that up there and make a bridge and stumble a little bit getting out, it's just the acting. The whole time the bridge is moving. It was so wonderful.